

# College Options for Students with Disabilities

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## Introduction

Graduating from college leads to better jobs and higher pay (Torpey, 2018). This is true for both individuals with and without disabilities, so it is no surprise that about 70 percent of high school graduates enroll in college each year (U.S. Department of Labor, 2017). College campuses are also becoming more diverse (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, and Chessman, 2019). Students with disabilities contribute to this diversity, comprising almost 20 percent of undergraduate students in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Universities, lawmakers, and practitioners are steadily recognizing the contributions that students with disabilities make to campus communities. Because of this, there are hundreds of programs and services that enable students with disabilities to access college if that is their dream.

This is an exciting trend, but such a great variety of options may cause some confusion. College programs and services for students with disabilities are as unique as the students they aim to support. Disability type, awarded credentials, admission requirements, costs, levels and types of support, inclusion, and program length are just a few things that can vary between programs.

## Types of College Programs

There are college programs to meet the needs of students with different types of disabilities, from physical disabilities to intellectual and developmental disabilities. As students and families make plans for higher education, it is important to note the student's goals, whether a program can help the student meet those goals, and whether the student is eligible for the program of interest. The three main categories of college programs or supports for students with disabilities in the U.S. are college accommodations, supported education programs, and inclusive higher education programs.

### 1. College Accommodations

By federal law, all colleges and universities must provide fair and reasonable accommodations to students with a documented disability. At every higher education institution, there is a disability services (DS) office that is responsible for coordinating these accommodations.

To access accommodations, a student must be admitted to and enrolled in a university. The student must then register with the campus DS office and provide them with documentation of the disability. Documentation requirements vary depending on the individual DS office. After documentation has been provided, the DS office will determine what types of fair and reasonable accommodations the student is eligible for. Students who are eligible for accommodations receive an accommodation letter, which they must then present to their instructors each semester.

Students must independently apply to access accommodations. Academic accommodations do not cost money to eligible students, do not modify or change the essential components of courses, and cannot place undue burden on instructors or institutions. College students with disabilities can apply for accommodations at any time, whether before the first semester or closer to graduation.

Some common accommodations include alternate format course materials, permission to use assistive technology like recording devices, extended time on tests and assignments, peer note takers, and priority course registration.

### College accommodations are a good fit for students who:

- Have earned a Standard or Advanced Studies Diploma
- Have been admitted to a college under the regular admissions requirements and will be a degree-seeking student
- Require low intervention academic support for college success
- Are willing to self-advocate and take on significant responsibility for their own learning

### Case Study: Marta

Marta is a rising freshman at a four-year college and plans to study Engineering. She applied to the university through the regular admissions process and will be pursuing a Bachelor's degree. Marta had an IEP in high school due to a learning disability. She knows that she may need academic accommodations to be successful in her college classes. During the summer before her first semester, she contacts the Disability Services office at her school.

While the intake process can vary slightly between colleges, the process at her school has three major steps.

1. Complete intake form
2. Provide documentation
3. Discuss support needs

First, Marta completes an intake form. This form gets basic information about her and her disability. Second, she must provide documentation of her disability. She submits a recent psychoeducational evaluation that her school psychologist conducted during high school. This evaluation clearly states that she has a learning disability. Third, Marta meets with a counselor from the Disability Services office to discuss her disability and support needs. At this meeting, she and the counselor talk about what accommodations she is eligible for.

At her meeting, Marta and the counselor determine that she will benefit from extra time on assignments, quiet testing environments, priority registration, and the use of a recording device to record lectures. She receives an accommodation letter that details these tools and

services. It is now Marta's responsibility to present this letter to her professors at the beginning of each class. She must present the letter to each professor individually, and she is not eligible to access accommodations for a class until she has presented the professor with the letter. After she presents the letter, the professor must comply with the accommodations. Marta knows that she will achieve the most success by continuing a dialogue with her professors throughout the semester. She also utilizes services and supports that are available to all students, regardless of disability. At her school, these include campus tutoring services, meeting professors during office hours, and weekly study groups.

## 2. Supported Education Programs

Many degree-seeking college students access academic accommodations and find them to be sufficient for achieving success in college. However, there are other students who require more significant supports to participate in higher education. For those students, there are supported education programs. Some supported education programs serve students who are earning a degree, and others provide a certificate and do not award college credit for courses taken.

### Supported Education Programs for Degree-Seeking Students

Some degree-seeking students require more than the standard academic accommodations to be successful in college. Typically, students who participate in these programs receive college accommodations in addition to the supports that the supported education program provides.

Universities may offer SE programs by disability type and support needs. There are options for students with autism, learning disabilities, mental health disabilities, sensory disabilities, and physical disabilities. Students must meet all of the admission requirements of the university, such as high school diploma type, GPA, and standardized testing requirements. They then participate in a separate application process for the supported education program.

Supported education programs give students additional supports that aren't covered by the federal laws that provide accommodations. More significant support for academics, soft skills, and executive functioning is common. Examples might include peer mentors, tutoring, social skill instruction, independent living support, and help with things like organization. Specific services vary by program and cost money. Fees may be covered by scholarships, grants, vocational rehabilitation agencies, or private pay.

### Supported Education Programs are a good fit for students who:

- Have earned a Standard or Advanced Studies Diploma
- Have been admitted to a college under the regular admissions requirements and will be a degree-seeking student
- Have a disability that could impact success in college beyond academics
- Require significant support with independent living, executive functioning, and social skills
- Are willing to pay a fee for support services

## Case Study: Antonio

Antonio is a high school senior applying for college. He is earning an Advanced Studies diploma and wants to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Art History. Antonio is concerned that his autism and ADHD could impact his college success. He knows that schools offer academic accommodations, but feels like he might need more help to thrive in college. He knows he can learn the material in class, but will need significant help with things like remembering to take his medicine, interacting with peers and professors, and staying on top of deadlines.

Antonio's school counselor tells him about a program called Autism in College (AIC) at one of the universities in his home state. He can apply to the program after he has been accepted to the university under the regular admissions process.

AIC costs \$6,000 per year in addition to regular tuition. Antonio will receive a peer mentor to help him with social skills and campus engagement and a learning coach who checks in with him weekly about his progress. He will also take a 1-credit class that focuses on developing skills for college success. Antonio will also be able to receive academic accommodations through the campus Disability Services office, and AIC staff will help him apply for accommodations.

## 3. Inclusive Higher Education Programs

Historically, students with intellectual disabilities (ID) have been completely excluded from higher education. This landscape is now changing as students with ID can access college similarly to their peers.

The national movement for inclusive postsecondary education (IPSE) gained significant traction in 2008 when the Higher Education Opportunity Act was put into law. This law created formal pathways for students with ID to access college by making federal financial aid more accessible, creating a national coordinating center for postsecondary programs, and funding Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability (TPSID) grants (Smith Lee, 2009).

In addition to TPSID programs, there are also Comprehensive Transition Programs (CTP). CTP is a federal designation given to college programs for students with ID that meet strict eligibility criteria regarding curriculum and inclusivity. There are over 100 Comprehensive Transition Programs and 25 TPSID programs in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2019; ThinkCollege, n.d.). As of February 2020, ThinkCollege lists over 280 total IPSE programs in the US.

IPSE programs are supported education programs like the ones detailed in the previous section, but they do not award a degree and they serve a specific population of students who would not be able to access college through more traditional means. Students who participate in IPSE programs do not have to meet the same diploma, GPA, and entrance exam requirements as other college students. They usually take courses for audit and receive support with academics, campus life, and employment. IPSE programs vary in their focus, levels and types of support, and costs.

## Inclusive postsecondary education programs are a good fit for students who:

- Have earned an Applied Studies or equivalent diploma (not Standard or Advanced Studies)
- Are not eligible to access college through the traditional application process
- Want to participate in college, but not earn a Bachelor's degree
- Have an intellectual or developmental disability
- Require significant supports and academic accommodations to be successful in college

### Case Study: Taylor

Taylor is a high school senior with an intellectual disability who will be receiving an Applied Studies diploma. Taylor has always dreamed of going to college and desires a career in criminal justice. He knows that he will not need a Bachelor's degree to work in this field, but that some college classes and inclusive employment experiences could help him to get a better job and make more money.

Taylor learns of a program at his local university called VCU ACE-IT in College. This program allows students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to audit regular college classes, participate in inclusive employment, and receive significant support from academic and employment coaches. ACE-IT costs about \$5,000 per semester in addition to tuition. Students apply to the program, and once accepted they are admitted to the university through a different route than degree-seeking students. At the end of the program, students earn a certificate of completion instead of a degree. The main goal of the program is for students to secure inclusive, paid employment in a career of their choice.

## Conclusion

While college is not the right path for every person, it must be an option for all who wish to attend. The benefits of participating in postsecondary education are well documented for people with and without disabilities. Further, not only does college benefit students with disabilities, but their inclusion on campus positively impacts other students and the larger campus community (Griffin, Summer, McMillan, Day, and Hodapp, 2012). Institutions and lawmakers are starting to recognize this truth, which has led to a record number of options for students with disabilities to access college. However, as is the case with any progress, there is still much room for growth as opportunities continue to expand and evolve.

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